



# Women living in urban cities: A situational analysis of Domestic Workers in Odisha

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## Abstract

The status of women has been a key issue since ancient period and still it is a big matter of concern in twenty first century. Though there are laws to protect the rights of women, they are far behind from all such legal facilities. Fixed minimum wage, equal pay for equal work, maternity leave, medical aid and other such basic essentials provided to any employee are still a mirage for domestic workers<sup>1</sup>. While all other workers have their unions, domestic workers remain ill organised. As said by Tine Staermose, the Director, International Labour Organisation, “there is an urgent need for the recognition of the people engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship as workers and to bring them under the labour legislation so they can access services and benefits similar to other workers”. There are close to 10 million domestic workers in India but despite significant contributions made by the work force in the country, society remains slow in recognising people engaged in domestic work because of which such people keep struggling to earn a living (ILO, 2014). The present paper has brought the situation of female domestic workers into common forum for discussion in future.

Key words: Minimum wage, ill organised, labour legislation, vulnerable, legal facility

## 1. Introduction

The position of women since ancient days has been a very complicated one in India because of the paradoxical statements in different religious scriptures and sometimes in the same text at different places. Some have described their status as ‘equals to men’, while others have held not only in disrespect but even in positive hatred. Women are treated as machineries of the house functioning according to all the old cultures, traditions and restrictions of the society. The patriarchal society has defined the societal roles and responsibilities of male and female and the position of women has been deteriorated by various factors. Though women got education, worked outside home environment, but the trend has not changed till date that women from elite families got recognition first and all

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thealternative.in/society/indias-domestic-worker-down-on-her-knees-and-mostly-out/?print=pdf>.

other kept inside home within patriarchal system. India is a land of villages which constitutes nearly 80% of its population. People from village move towards cities to get opportunities to earn livelihood. But it leads to growth of population in urban cities as well as there is rise in scarcity of basic needs for the low wage earners. Particularly labour migration gives rise to such situations where people do not get space to have shelter. In other side plays it plays an important role in economic development and manpower planning in third world countries. The migration process has a profound effect on both the areas from where the migrants come and the areas where they finally settle. Urbanisation is the most significant phenomenon of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which has affected all aspects of national life in India. Being the second most populous country in the world after China, India fast growing urbanisation has a regional as well as worldwide impact. India has a long tradition of urbanisation which has continued since the days of the Indus valley Civilisation (N.R. Madhuri, 2009). If urbanisation continues at the present rate, then 46% of the total population, 643 million people will be in urban regions of India by 2030 (UN, 1998). Despite India's impressive rates of economic growth over the past three decades, vast numbers of Indians are unable to secure a meaningful livelihood. 29.8 percent of all Indians lived below the national poverty line, while 33.8 percent of rural Indians lived below the national rural poverty line (World Bank, 2010).

Domestic work is the low wage labour and the workers involved in this are too regarded as inferior. Their invisible hand to the economic development of the country is also not recognised. Domestic work seems to be the destiny of significantly huge number of women workers in India who seek employment opportunities in urban sector, often rendering an invisible workforce who are not paid well, and deprived of rights to ensure decency in work. Reflecting on indecent working and living condition of women domestic workers, National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS, 2007, p. 86) views, "Working in the unregulated domain of a private home, mostly without the protection of national labour legislation, allows for female domestic workers to be maltreated by their employers with impunity. Women are often subjected to long working hours and excessively arduous tasks. They may be strictly confined to their places of work. The domestic workforce is excluded from labour laws that look after important employment-related issues such as conditions of work, wages, social security, provident funds, old age pensions, and maternity leave." India lags behind other nations in extending rights to domestic workers. India is yet to provide core entitlements for decent work like maternity benefit (ILO, 2010). On the other hand, 26 nations, including developed and developing countries provide 12-14 weeks of maternity leave for domestic workers. Moreover, national minimum wage act 1948 excludes domestic workers from its purview. However, states, members of federal union, may fix minimum wage for domestic workers within their territory. Another important deficit is lack of social security to domestic workers in India while there have been noteworthy initiatives by other countries to provide different types of social security to domestic workers – occupational safety and health, workers' compensation for employment injuries, general health care, pension and unemployment insurance. Domestic workers are not recognised by society as 'workers' in the first place. While many forms of labour activity take place outside the domestic domain, domestic workers perform their duties in the household. Quite an unconventional place as it is, the domain of household is still not accepted as a workplace. Though labour laws exist, it becomes very complex to administer their working in the household sector. Unlike other jobs, there are no streamlined descriptions that can be made a part of the contract. The fact that there are 4.2 million domestic workers (according to the

latest data of NSSO 61st Round) and their labour is not computed is appalling. A few thousand domestic workers in India marched with placards, shouting slogans near Parliament on the 2nd of August, 2018. They were demanding legal provisions to secure their rights while the government has been planning to replace more than 30 labour laws with a few codes. For instance, the Draft Labour Code on Social Security aims to universalise social security so that the definition of employee covers all kinds of work, yet unions have expressed displeasure at some of its provisions. For instance, all workers have to be registered under the said act to avail social security benefits. Considering that a person would be called a 'worker' only if he/she works for a particular period of time in a year, the bill might exclude thousands of domestic workers. Also, experts and activists are of the opinion that these codes will further deteriorate the existing legal protection extended to domestic workers in India. In fact, for women engaged in domestic work, in particular in urban India, even generating subsistence level income entails a complex process of scheduling of activities since they tend to work with multiple employers, who prefer flexible forms of labour contracts like part time engagement of domestic workers. Unfortunately, these workers, incurring the risk of working in indecent conditions, are enmeshed in a system with excess supply of workers; they tend to offer services to relatively well-off households, who are likely to have much better availability of rights and entitlements. With this backdrop the present paper has tried to focus on the situation of female domestic workers in the state of Odisha with special focus on urban capital city.

## **2. Objective of the study**

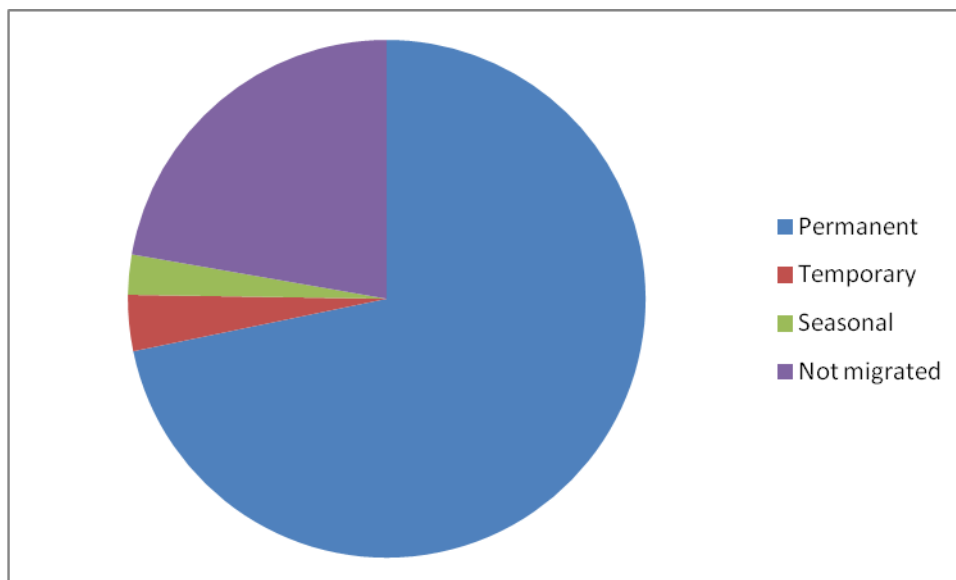
1. To focus on the patterns of female migration for domestic work
2. To find out the problems faced by female domestic workers in urban cities
3. To study on the factors responsible for inferior position of female domestic workers.

## **3. Methodology**

Unfortunately there is no such concrete information on the domestic workers population in the country. The Government databases like the census, labour statistics or sample survey has no specific category of workers as domestic workers. Due to the unavailability of much information on domestic workers the researcher followed the convenient sampling method for choosing the respondents. Personal interview, observation, group discussions are some of the methods followed while interacting with the domestic workers.

## **4. Female domestic workers and migration**

Women migration in India is mostly marriage induced. Migration leads to various problems faced by women domestic workers and they are not capable enough to access the opportunities in the beginning and with the help of relatives or other domestic workers they find the job. Regardless of the duration of their stay, labour migrants face myriad challenges at their destinations in a place that is dizzying in its diversity of languages and cultures. Among the challenges: restricted access to basic needs such as identity documentation, social entitlements, housing, and financial services.

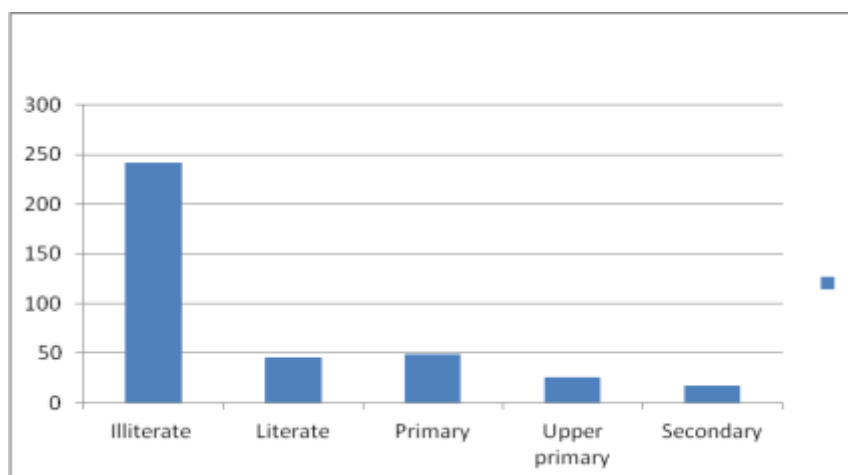


**Figure-1 type of migration among female domestic workers.**

In the above there is more than 90 percent of the sample studied are migrant domestic workers. Out of migrated domestic workers very few are temporary or seasonal migrants. The reasons vary from person to person, but mostly they have migrated for income and livelihood. As far as the housing is concerned more than 50 percent women are living in a house covered with polythin and mud walls. Rest of the respondents are having house with no such facilities and accessories necessary.

### 5. Educational status of Female domestic workers

Education being the most important indicators of women empowerment can ensure domestic workers' awareness on different laws, acts concerning their work. Young girls in this profession are dropouts from school after primary education due to insufficient scope for education or financial problem. The figure shows that domestic workers are mostly illiterate. Young domestic workers, who are continuing their education in schools, prefer to earn to support their study, because their parents cannot afford for their education. Out of total sample, 60 percent domestic workers are illiterate. It was positive sign that some of these women wish to give higher study to their girls, but again gender discrimination is the barrier.



**Figure-2 level of education.**



They cannot afford education of both son and daughter. In this run, girls are asked to stay at home and boys get opportunity for education. Due to lack of education they cannot understand existing laws and provisions made for their cause including job situation, minimum wage, working hour etc. It was very difficult to make them understand all these issues.

## **6. Female Domestic workers and social security in urban cities**

Nearly 90 percent of the world's 67 million domestic workers do not have any kind of social security coverage (ILO). Majority of them are women and their work is undervalued and unprotected. There is no insurance policy for them in old age. According to ILO report the largest gaps in protection for domestic workers were most severe in developing countries in case of international migration the legal protection is very limited. Fiscal incentives, registration, awareness campaigns targeting women domestic workers are lacking. The respondents complaining about the social security that others categories of labourers are getting. The study report shows that domestic workers have no knowledge about the benefits they are entitled; there is no such written contract between them and the employer (Primary data). Working in employers' house is always not safe for the domestic workers. But they cannot help themselves. Although they do not like such situations they afraid to raise voice against this because of losing their job.

## **7. Socio-cultural bias and female domestic workers**

As per the bias against women is concerned it is an age old tradition, which is still prevailing in our society. Female domestic workers face such discrimination in relation to their work, wage everyday and everywhere. After moving to a new place they work as domestic help in cities and family at native are unknown to that matter. In some cases there is strict rule to not enter into kitchens, if a woman is working in other's house, washing their utensils. Tribal cultures have such typical rule for those women working as domestic help. In some parts of the state they have to stay outside home for few days, after one ritual, they can enter into house and participate in family function or other matters.

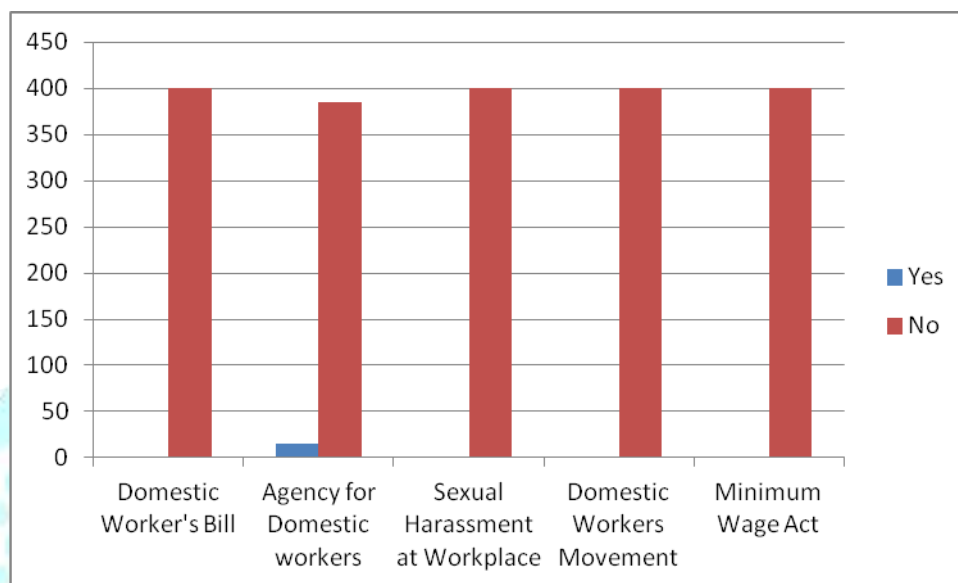
Social biases are deep rooted in the urban cities for domestic workers due to their low wage job. They have developed an inferior complex in themselves.

## **8. Minimum wage and domestic work**

Another vital area where women have been discriminated against is their wage. Working condition and wages are poor due to the informal and oral nature of contract. In urban cities, there are practical difficulties to face for the poor people such as purchasing food items, clothes, grocery and other household instruments. Usually women manage the household and they face the difficulty not the male members of the family. Most of the women are independently managing everything in the family. Their husband is either a drunkard or not giving money or living with other woman. With a very limited income domestic workers cannot dream for a happy life (primary data). More than 70 percent domestic workers have monthly income fall in the class group of Rs. 2000-3000 only. So

their problem lies in getting full meal three times a day with such a hand to mouth income. The women domestic workers often continue accepting whatever the employers pay them and are under constant fear that asking for a raise may lead to termination from work as there would be many more workers who are available to do the same work by accepting whatever the employer pays them (Irudaya, 2010).

Over all status shows that due to various factors female domestic workers are not aware of any of the provisions and legal rights made for them (Figure-3)



**Figure-3 awareness among female domestic workers.**

The Supreme Court has noted that domestic workers should be remunerated regardless of the type of establishment, potential to pay and accessibility of domestic workers at reduced wages. The availability of employment is not based in the level of pays and that reducing pays does not necessarily result in increased employment rate (Poonam, 2016). The women domestic workers are not considered as professionals by anyone in the absence of systematic skill development and capacity development opportunities in India. A bill to provide domestic workers with a minimum monthly salary of Rs.9,000 and benefits including social security cover and mandatory time off is awaiting approval in Parliament. Unless the government connects the skilled worker to progressive employers and corporate houses the situation will not change

## 8. Conclusion

There is an increasing demand for domestic workers in the urban cities. Women as a majority of domestic workers population need to get recognition with social security as well as legal protection. Several issues raised regarding domestic worker's problems and no one give attention and as named as 'kamwali', they are always neglected part of Indian workforce. They are also socially weak, economically vulnerable and politically disadvantaged section of Indian society. They deserve proper care, protection and measures for empowerment. Domestic workers are largely absent from the state policy which is tied to the social and economic devaluation of care and its gendered, class and caste characteristics. The lack of unionization is a critical factor in the exclusion of domestic workers from labor laws and other protective measures (Neetha and Palriwala, 2011).

## Suggestions

- Implementation and enforcement of legal provision is necessary to improve the status of domestic workers living in urban cities throughout the country.
- Intervention of organisations, trade union need to be focused. Education for dropout girls who work domestic workers should enrolled in vocational training institutes or night schools.
- Domestic workers should have small groups in all over city areas and they should be provided with help from trade unions or other agencies.
- So, there is urgent need is to include domestic work as a separate category of work in the list of workers in the census, labour data.

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